

## 2010 Plain DNF Report.

### Rob Lahoe

I had signed up to run the Plain 100 in 2009, but because of a knee injury had to drop from the race before any real training began. I signed up again for the 2010 and started training right after running an aid station at the HURT 100 in January. Part of my mental training included printing out every Plain race report I could find and then reading each one of them over and over again. I'm hoping that this race report will help out some of those that want to finish the Plain 100 on their first attempt. It can be done, but this is a trail which requires preparation, patience, and knowledge of one's body.

I had read both of Davy Crockett's race reports, which convinced me to buy a GPS unit for the race. Other than running, this was the best pre-race preparation I could have done. If you are planning on running this race, especially alone, get a GPS. I used the [Garmin 60cx](#), and then bought the [Northwest 24k DVD](#). I also downloaded the [Northwest trails map from switchbacks.com](#). I also bought the green trail map, but ended up not needing it. I loaded both the Northwest trail map and the Garmin 24k onto my desktop, and then used the route tool to plan my route. There were some places where the 24k map did not show a trail, so I switched to the NW map, and when that didn't show a trail I switched back to the 24k map. Overall I made it work. I flagged locations about every ¼ to every ½ mile (which was a mistake—I'll get to that later.)

I laminated the race directions and put them in my wallet. For 6 months. Every time I had a few minutes of doing nothing, I took out the directions and read them. Even though I had no idea what the names meant, or where they were, I pretty much memorized the whole thing. This also helped get the lamination into a permanent crease which was easier to carry on race day.

So my race preparation went pretty smoothly. I had no major injuries, and I was very happy with my training regimen. If you live in Hawaii, you're familiar with Peacock Flats. I ran there every Sunday, starting from just doing a "Long Road" repeat and building up to where my "normal" run was a 27 mile loop (if you're not from Hawaii, [here is a pretty good summary of that loop](#)). I think each loop has about 10,000 feet gain, including two huge hills on either end which take about 1 ½ hours to climb their ~2,000/ea foot ascent.

When I heard of people going onto the HURT trail, I went there and did at least one 20 mile loop as well. I think I did this about 3-4 times, but wish I would have done that a little more (again, more about that later). My last long training run was almost a month before the race. I had planned on doing two Peacock loops (~54 miles, ~20,000 foot climb) fully loaded, and then do 1 loop the next week. But on my longest run I got a blister under the thickest part of the callus on my right heel. I think I may have even bruised the bone a bit, and that took a couple of weeks to heal. So unfortunately I didn't get to run that last loop at Peacocks. However, I did get to climb Diamond Head holding my 9 month old daughter a couple of weeks before the race. Better to be rested and undertrained than to be tired and overtrained!

I left on my flight 1 week early so I could stay with my mom in Washington State, and so she could get her "grandchildren fill" for the year. It was nice to introduce my 9 month old daughter to the family (especially her grandfather who passed away while she was still in mommy's tummy) and to relax and let mom take care of things while I concentrated on the huge task in front of me.

I left on Friday morning to meet an old high school friend of mine who is now living in Leavenworth, just about 20 minutes away from the start line. Although we hadn't seen each other in about 16 years, I feel we became great friends again in the couple of days we saw each other. We both headed to the pre-race meeting and dinner. Although I felt pretty confident up until this point, listening to all the horror stories of people getting lost didn't do much for my confidence. We went around the room and introduced ourselves, most of us being first timers or DNF'rs who had come back to take revenge on the trail. I had to remind myself of all the experience in that room, and to have that many DNF's was a little surprising!



I sat next to a very nice guy named Andrew Wong, who had made it half way through the second loop last year but ended up running out of time before he could finish. This was perfect for me. My strategy was

to start dead last, or at least as far back as my nerves would let me, and slowly make my way forward after the second big climb. I would stick with him for as far as I could. I also got to sit next to Tim Stroh, who was handing out as much advice as he could give to the throngs of newbie's asking him questions. The biggest concern seemed to be the turn about 2 ½ miles into loop 2, where a lot of people go into Goose Camp (left, which is the natural flow of the trail) instead of turning right onto the correct trail.



After the dinner my friend Mari and I decided to drive up to Goose Camp to make sure I got to see the turn. I'm not sure about years past, but this year there was a huge sign there that read "Attention" which was almost impossible not to see, even in the dark. Mari was even kind enough to take a picture of it for me. I'm guessing so she could tease me if I missed it.



So after memorizing that trail, we headed bag to the drop bag area (Deep Creek) and went a little ways on the 1<sup>st</sup> loop. This also helped a bit because at least now I knew of a few turns in the road I should not be taking. I highly suggest at least driving as much of the road as you can.

We went back, double and triple checked my gear over a glass of wine and Gatorade, and I finally fell asleep around 11:30. I'm not sure if it was nerves or the fact that I was still on Hawaiian Time a bit (11:30 pacific = 8:30 Hawaiian time). We woke up at 3:30 AM and headed to the start/finish area. It was cold! I had prepared a huge breakfast for myself including bananas, a huge bowl of chia seeds, and a bagel that Mari had brought for me. So by the time we got the Clear Creek lodge, I was pretty full.

The start time approached way too fast, and before I knew it, we were off! While driving this first portion the night before, I had commented to Mari that I would probably just walk the entire first portion, since it's a little uphill. I didn't want to run any portion at the beginning that I wouldn't run at mile 70. However, everyone took off, and I mean they REALLY took off. You're so scared of getting lost that the only thing going through your mind is "stay with someone, stay with the group," and I did. I was cursing at myself for the first hour about how stupid I was going to feel in about a day when this little jaunt would come back and haunt me (it didn't however). I just kept playing through my head "What would Mike Muench do, what would Mike Muench do?" Then I'd answer "He'd walk, stupid!" So I found myself at the back of the pack, most runners already way ahead of me by the time I got onto the road heading up to Maverick Saddle. I'm still astounded at how fast that start was!

Once we turned the corner at Deer Creek, I found myself just behind my new friend Andrew. We had a nice conversation and it was awesome having someone there who had already run the trail. It took me a good 2 hours to figure out how to use my GPS although I had no troubles with it at all on the training

runs, so having him there in the early parts made me feel much more confident. I would have gotten lost at the first turn at Maverick Saddle without him!

Once the GPS unit started working for me, I had 100% confidence I was going the right direction. I will never do this course without a GPS! We started up the Hi-Yu trail, and this is where I wished I had run on the HURT trails a little more. It starts out pretty steep and sort of muddy, just like many of the climbs at HURT. From the start of the climb, it took me about 4 ½ hours of climbing before I made it to Klone Peak. Out of that, I'd say about ½ hour was runnable. That's a big first climb!

Some people enjoy having thousands of fans following them at every computerized, time checked, weighed-in, well-stocked, and heavily sponsored checkpoint. I mean, haven't the Western States RDs gotten Starbucks to open a store on the Pacific Coast Trail yet? I, too, have enjoyed the use of modern technology while on long races. When I started the Plain 100, I posted pictures of the beautiful Cascade Mountain Range on my Facebook page. But I started getting too far away from the cell phone towers, and my phone batteries started to die. So, with one last grasp at technology, I posted my final Facebook picture at Klone peak, and that was it. No way to get hold of my wife or mom (or kids or dog) to complain. No way to contact Search and Rescue if I fell off one of the numerous multi-thousand foot drop offs 6 inches to my left. Other than the few runners still around me at that time, I felt very alone.



I left with Andrew and we made the short hike up to the final portion of that climb before turning down and having a very long runnable section. I think it lasted a few hours! Once we got onto the 3 miles of road area, though, I started to pull away from Andrew and would pretty much be on my own for the rest of the race. I had passed about 4 people at Klone Peak, and it was time to start picking up the pace. I wanted to pass at least 6 more people by the time I got to Tyee Ridge.

I passed one other person on that 3 mile section of road, just a few yards before the turnout. Again, I'm so glad I had my GPS with me, or I probably would have missed that turnout. More downhill and I was

starting to get agitated by now. I'm used to a few miles of either up or down—this was turning out to be 13-14 miles uphill and then 13-14 miles of downhill and was starting to wear on me.

I finally made it down to the last river crossing before the huge climb up to Tyee. I stopped and took off my pack and basically had a miniature picnic there. I took out my nutella/honey/banana sandwich and ate about ¼ of it before throwing it into the creek. By then it was pretty bad. I drank a full handheld bottle of protein shake, then washed that bottle out and filled it along with my 100 oz bladder with water. I left there at 2 PM. As it turned out, I wouldn't be able to get water for about 6 ½ hours.

Looking at the profile of this climb, I knew the bottom portion would be tougher, and then the climb would flatten out slightly the higher I got. The first 1 ½ hours of that climb were pretty damn hard. I had all this extra weight on my back, lots of food in my belly, and relentless switchbacks that just seemed to get harder and harder. I had read Bob McAllaster's race report where he stated that this climb was no tougher than doing a climb up out of Paradise Park. He lied. For the first 1 ½ hours I was really questioning my race strategy. I kept looking back and wondering when I was going to be passed up by all those people, but none came. Finally, after that first excruciating portion, I was able to get a good rhythm going, and I held onto it. Sure, I had to stop a couple of more times, but it was nothing like that first portion.

So I finally hit a great rhythm, and the rest of that climb felt great. Now that I had passed over the halfway point of that climb, it WAS feeling like a normal HURT climb. I powered up and passed a few more runners. Some of which did not look good.

I went past the false summit onto the top in about 2 ½ hours. I felt great. Now it was time to start running again! I made it to another SAR checkpoint—they were in their trucks and I immediately went towards their windows to check in. Once I got there I continued with my forward motion up the road and to the right. But my GPS said I should be going down and to the left!? I went a ways further, realized my mistake and turned around, asked the SAR guys if they were blocking a trail (to which they said “no”) and made a few more 180 degree turns before finding the trail in front of their truck, to my left as I came out of the trail (not right up to their trucks). I heard one of them say something like “Happy Trails” as I left. I don't think my response at that time was so happy.

I ran a little further, but was getting a blister on the bottom of my foot. I still had a long ways to go, so stopped the second I felt it. While I was dealing with this nuisance, someone passed me (I think it was Wendell Doman) so I hurriedly put my socks and shoes back on and fell behind. I followed him down this crazy section strewn with bushes all over the trail and slick rocks on the ground. Every time he was below me on a switchback I had visions of one of those rocks coming out from under my feet and falling on his head. I tried to be as careful as possible at this point. The sun was getting low and it had been a long time since I'd stopped for a break.

It took a long time to finally get to the bottom of that ridge. I had drained the 100 oz bladder in my pack and had drunk about ½ the water from my handheld when we finally got there. I filled up again and off we went.

Then something funny happened. My GPS ran out of points. I'm still trying to figure this out, but I'm guessing you are only allowed to put so many points on your GPS. I had mapped out the entire course on

my computer, but when it transferred to my GPS unit, it must have just stopped and around 200 or something. So there I was, still with one more loop to go, and no more waypoints. I was really worried. Oh well, nothing I could do about it now except put that damned thing in my pack and forget about it.

It was now dark and we had our lights out. I was still following Wendell over the numerous very cold river crossings. Normally, going over a river, you have 2 or 3 rocks that you can count on being solidly in the ground. Not here. These things were anything but stable. Wendell took a header into one of the streams about ½ hour before Maverick Saddle and I felt really bad. If it would have been me, I'd have been out for sure. He must have been so friggin cold. I offered him my jacket, but he refused, putting on his dripping wet and cold jacket.

After Maverick Saddle I unlatched from Wendell and turned on my running gear. I got passed by two guys (Must have been Scott Tomchick and Tom Jackson) running like they were out on a nice spring day just doing a few miles before work. I mean they looked fresh. I was jealous as they blew by me. I tried to keep up, but they were cruising!

I got into the drop bag area 6 minutes behind them, quickly dropped all my stuff and tried to start checking off all the things I had to do as fast as possible. Mari had been there for over 5 hours helping other runners. Luckily, she had saved a warm cup of clam chowder for me, which tasted like heaven! A bunch of other people came in at this time, and I heard Andrew mention that he was done. I tried to tell him I needed him to help me on the next loop, but I think his mind was made up. I wish I could've got him back out there. I think I might have finished if I would have had someone out there pushing me a little harder. Anyway, I stuffed myself, changed socks, shoes, batteries, and hats; and was off.



Although I knew I shouldn't, I decided to power walk the next portion until I hit the top of the next climb. I still passed a few people, which made me feel a little better. When I got to the next SAR checkpoint at Twin Creek, they had a flashing light on the right side of the trail leading up. I naturally called out my number and followed the light onto that trail. After walking a little ways, though, I noticed there were no footprints, so I turned around back to the sign and got out my directions. I was supposed to go left here! I mentioned that it was kind of deceiving to put the light on the wrong trail, but they said the light was for the guys who were returning from that loop (this is where you take the trail to the left, do a huge circle,

and come back by the trail on the right—if I would have kept going, I would've done the second loop backwards). Man! They must have been really cruising! At least I had made it before they were coming down, I guess.

So there I was. I was already calculating my finishing time (which should have been about 33-34 hours), when at about mile 68 or so, kicked a root which sent pain from my big toe all the way up to my knee. Within the next 5 minutes I kicked two very heavy rocks and tore or sprained a muscle in my shin. This slowed me down considerably, which in a “normal” race wouldn't have been that big of a deal because someone would always be near me to give some sort of assistance. However, at Plain I could expect to be alone in my agony for many more hours. I would have no medically trained personnel at the next checkpoint exactly 2.458 miles away. Instead I had to face the demons in my head for many hours as I tried to make it to someplace, somewhere, some unknown distance away, where I might see a Search And Rescue volunteer who would only look at me with a glint of mischief in their eyes as they rolled down the window of their vehicle, took my number, and closed their window without another word. Visions of rescue helicopters and search dogs filled my head throughout the night. After about 4 ½ hours, though, I made it to the Chickamin Tie checkpoint. I was lucky enough to see the RDs, Tom and Chris, who coaxed me into returning to the trail. Diane Van Deren had shown up after getting lost for a couple of hours at the start of loop two (remember that “Attention” sign? Well, that trail claimed a couple more people this year, and apparently Diane was one of them). I begrudgingly left with her, not knowing when I'd next see a race volunteer.

I kept up with Diane the best I could for about 9 miles before collapsing on the trail floor because of the pain in my shin. I yelled down the trail for Diane to continue, which she did with great reluctance. I didn't know it then, but I still had about 13 miles of the most painful, slow, difficult, agonizing, and wonderful (yes, I said wonderful) trail until the next SAR check-in at mile 97.

I had no one. I had no phone. I had me and my pain and an unknown amount of miles to cover. And now I was certain I was in last place, so no one would be coming from behind, and since there are no trail markings, no one would be sweeping. I cannot begin to touch the internal struggles and self awareness I went through so I'm not even going to try. However, I will say that I am now a changed person because of this race. I am a better, more confident, more humble, and more appreciative person.

I tried my hardest to finish, but by the time I made it back to Twin Creek (the place I almost ran the trail backwards) it was 3:14 in the afternoon. I had 1:45 to do the last 10 miles or so. If I had another hour I would've given it a shot, but I was hurting, and just couldn't see myself making it. So reluctantly I stopped. I guess I'm still a little heartbroken about it.

This race can be a character building and liberating adventure. This race, for me at least, has become the race for which all others will be measured against. The Plain 100 was my only planned ultra in 2010. I trained relentlessly for a race I knew would be hard, but had no way of knowing the manner by which this trail takes its runners, bites them in half, and feeds bits of smelly trail gear to its young.

Will I be back to take revenge? Let me lick my wounds for a bit. I'll get back to you on that.